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## **A Narrative of Contested Views of Development in Thai Society: Voices of Villagers in Rural Northeastern Thailand \***

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### **Abstract**

This paper is a report of an ethnographic field research reflecting contested views of development on how to become modern in Thai society. It demonstrates how villagers in two rural Thai-Lao communities in the Northeast of Thailand utilized discourses of development after having been subjected to development programs and policies of the Thai state beginning in the 1960s. It also argues that development concepts and practices have become a political and cultural space where constant negotiation, integration, cooperation, contestation, and resistance are taking place. While the Thai state is responsible for initiating the concept of development, village discourses about the concept cannot be interpreted as reflecting unquestioned hegemony of a ruling elite. Development, thus, has become a political and cultural location that entails not only cooperation of villagers with state agencies, but also contestation of the authority of some of these agencies. The actual experiences of villagers with official development initiatives and their own pursuit of development have led to tensions not only between villagers and representatives of the state, but also within village society. In pursuit of interests that are differentiated by class, gender, and age, some villagers have also sought allies within and outside their villages. The contestation over development meanings and practices in these two villages reflects, thus, a more widespread debate in Thai society about what it means to be modern.

**Keywords:** post-development, development discourses, grassroots politics of development in Thailand

### **Introduction**

Modernization was intellectually most influential in the late 1950s and 1960s and continues to dominate development policies and practices in most developing countries today. Modernization theories outline development in terms of a progressive change towards tech-

\* For lengthy detailed information, please see Ratana Boonmathya, 1997, "Contested Concepts of Development in Rural Northeastern Thailand," Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Anthropology, University of Washington, Seattle, USA.

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nologically more complex and integrated forms of modern society [Long and Long 1992]. Modernization is essentially an evolutionary process in which every society is perceived as being in different stages of development and moving toward a linear evolutionary path leading finally to industrialized, urban, and orderly society. Key development strategies to this process include industrialization, urbanization and the transformation of traditional subsistence agriculture to market-oriented agricultural production [Gardner and Lewis 1996]. Scientific thinking and rationality in both economic and ethical senses are given high priority. Modern societies are generally seen as universalistic, developed, and profit-oriented whereas traditional rural agricultural societies are perceived as firmly rooted in tradition, particularistic and uninspired to profit [Parsons 1949; Rostow 1960].

Similar to many developing countries, Thailand has adopted modernization and the growth model as its official development policy since its First National Development Plan in 1961. Modernization paradigm and the concept of the economic growth following Western development model are dominant and form the basis of official Thai views of development.

In the Northeast of Thailand, also known as *Isan*, modernization began in the reign of King Chulalongkorn of the Chakri dynasty through centralized bureaucratic-administrative reform in 1892. Similar to many parts of the country, Isan was incorporated into the Siamese Kingdom and subjected to the ruling power in Bangkok by the early twentieth century. Keyes [1967] argues that the effective ability of the Siamese state to centralize Bangkok's power over its outlying provinces and vassals states and to transform relatively subsistence agricultural production into commercialization indicated the weakening power of rural traditional elite in particular and rural society in general. Nonetheless, the extension of Bangkok's power to include Isan as part of the Thai nation-state was not without local resistance. From 1900–02, the millenarian rebellions against Bangkok existed throughout the region [Tej Bunnag 1967; 1977; Murdoch 1974; Ishii 1975; Keyes 1977; Chattip Nartsupha 1984].

The subsequent governments, especially during the Sarit administration further carried out the modernizing process initiated in the reign of King Chulalongkorn. Thus, by the time the first development plan was promulgated by the Thai government during the Sarit administration in the 1960s, the foundations for reorienting Thai society toward modernity had already been laid since early the twentieth century. The Sarit government with military, technical, and financial assistance from the US. government envisioned the need to bring about economic development in Isan lest the livelihood problem continued to be a cause for rural unrest in the Isan countryside and provided a good ground for the growing communist insurgency and perhaps even separatism [Keyes 1967; Thak Chaloemtiarana 1979]. Thus, a specific development plan for Isan from 1962–66 was set up [Thailand, The Committee on Development of the Northeast, NESDB 1961].

After four decades of economic development following modernization and the growth model, villagers in Isan have experienced intricate rural transformations. The impact of development at the village level is profound. Although many villagers express their admira-

tion for and want to emulate the modern lifestyle of the Bangkok elite, they feel a discrepancy between official development rhetoric and activities and what they actually experience in their lives.

This paper examines how villagers in two rural Thai-Lao communities in the Northeast of Thailand utilized discourses of development after having been subjected to development programs sponsored by the Thai state over the past four decades. Data for this paper was collected when I did my primary ethnographic field research in Ban Phra and Ban Koke<sup>1)</sup> in Khon Kaen province from August 1994 to December 1995 and revisited them from time to time during 2000–02.

### **Villages in Focus**

#### **Ban Phra and Ban Koke: Local-Global**

Ban Phra and Ban Koke are located in Khon Kaen province of the Northeast. Khon Kaen was selected as my research site, because it is the official center of northeastern Thailand regarding regional development, administration, and academia. In addition, since the 1980s, there have been various NGOs working in the province. Upon the recommendation of Community Development Department in Khon Kaen,<sup>2)</sup> two villages were selected for my field work: Ban Phra in Muang district, about 7 kilometers southeastward of the Khon Kaen city and Ban Koke in Nam Phong district, about 36 kilometers north of the Khon Kaen town.

In 1995, Ban Phra was about 181 years old with 200 families whereas Ban Koke was about 156 years old with 158 families in Ban Koke (Village Survey, 1995). In 2000, the total number of families in Ban Phra and Ban Koke rose to about 240 and 200, respectively. Some older villagers in Ban Phra reported that their ancestors were descendants of Lao noblemen, Phra Wo and Phra Taa, who sought political independence from Vientiane by migrating to resettle in the Korat Plateau. Phra Wo and Phra Taa led their people to resettle in the Chi River basin in the latter part of the eighteenth century. Later, these people moved to different places in the provinces of Khon Kaen, Mahasarakham, Ubon, and Yasothorn today.

Approximately, during the 1810s, as a result of drought and crop failure, about 9 or 10 people from Ban Phaeng in Mahasarakham came to resettle in Ban Phra. Also, some villagers from Ban Non and Ban Tha in Mahasarakham migrated out to different places in search of better land for farming and living. They traveled by ox carts to many places from

1 ) For confidentiality, Ban Phra and Ban Koke, and all villagers' names appear in this paper are pseudonyms. As many informants were very pointed in criticizing state-led development policies and practices, I chose to protect their identities to avoid any possible adverse effects that might occur to them.

2 ) This study employs a critical anthropological approach to deconstruct dominant development views and practices. Thus, to be fair to the government sector, I informed the relevant local authority—Office of the Department of Community Development in Khon Kaen—of the general criteria for village selection for this study and asked them to help select those villages under study.

Mahasarakham to Khon Kaen and finally decided to resettle in Ban Phra because water was abundant. They found a big swamp called Nong Phur where they could obtain water for use, catch fish, and gather reeds for mat weaving. Later, Ban Phra expanded, as some villagers from Ubon and Kalasin migrated in search of an alternative to the arid farmland in their original villages.

The origin of Ban Koke started with two great grandparents: Mok and Kratieu who led their relatives from their parched barren original settlements in Roi-Et and Mahasarakham to Khon Kaen during the 1830s. They traveled by ox carts for months until they resettled in Ban Koke, which was a vast undulating area with spring water in the lowland part of southwest of the community and dense forests close to the Nam Phong River. Later, villagers from neighboring communities and the Kok Hin Khao area moved to stay in the community.

The short oral histories of Ban Phra and Ban Koke reflect the persistence of drought in Isan until these days. In the past, when dense forests were still available and land was vast and unoccupied, migration to resettle in a better place for farming and living was a viable alternative. Today, when natural resources, especially land are no longer available for resettlement as a result of modernizing the country and population increase, many poor villagers find it hard to cope with this present situation. Conflicts over land ownership rights in Isan are rising, as will be shown in the case of Kok Hin Khao later.

Villagers of Ban Phra and Ban Koke do share some similarities. Peoples in both communities are of Lao origin, the largest ethnic group in Isan who shared history and culture with the low-land Lao in Laos rather than the central Thai prior to being subjected to the Bangkok power in the early twentieth century. They share a similar pattern of the Isan-Lao culture, village size, access to local economic markets, and other infrastructural facilities, such as being located next to provincial highways and close to the Chi and Nam Phong Rivers. Both villages are part of the advanced agricultural and industrial zone of Khon Kaen.

Similar to most Isan-Lao villages, villagers in these two communities follow Theravada Buddhism. Buddhist rituals are usually held at the village temples, the symbolic center of popular religious beliefs. Villagers have strong reverence for Buddhist monks and support of the temples. Nonetheless, their primary religious beliefs and their ways of life have largely been influenced by a combination of the beliefs in Theravada Buddhism and spirit cults.<sup>3)</sup>

Economically, most villagers in both communities perceive that the majority of them just have enough for living and eating. The majority of villagers in Ban Phra and Ban Koke are small farmers and landless peasants. Sixty-six percent of the total families in Ban Phra and 52% in Ban Koke own less than 20 *rai* (or 8 acres) of farm land, and 25% of the total families in Ban Phra and 11% in Ban Koke are landless peasants (Village Survey, 1995). There is a tendency for the number of small farmers and landless peasants in both communities to increase due to the scarcity of land available and the breaking up of land into small pieces

3) S. J. Tambiah [1970] in his writing entitled "*Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand*" has provided an insightful analysis on the structural patterns of family and household in a rural northeastern Thai-Lao village.

through land inheritance.

Villagers of the two communities have produced for the market economy since the First Plan in the 1960s. They have engaged in on-farm and off-farm production. In Ban Phra, most people produce fresh vegetables for the Khon Kaen city market all year round, since they have access to irrigation water. In Ban Koke, most people grow cassava, sugar cane, beans, watermelons, and some vegetables. Rice is the most important crop grown in both communities, especially the glutinous rice, which is the staple diet of the Isan-Lao villagers. Rice is produced mainly for home consumption, although some surplus rice is sold when a family needs cash.

Many people in both communities see off-farm production as an important means to earn money for family expenses. As a result of the rapid economic growth in Thailand and the Northeast during the past four decades (prior to the current economic crisis in Thailand that began in the mid-1997), villagers have embraced the opportunity to participate in the expanding economy. Many villagers have engaged in the construction work, service-related business, and small and medium-scale industries, such as fish-net making, fish canning, cassava pellets, sugar, liquor, garment, and paper factories. These industrial products are produced primarily for local and international markets. A number of young villagers in both communities are motivated to come to work and stay in the city where they come to feel that their lifestyles and identities are different from their parents.<sup>4)</sup> A small number of villagers in Ban Phra and Ban Koke have migrated to work abroad, for this requires a large investment. About 14.5% of the total families in Ban Phra and 7.5% in Ban Koke have migrated to work abroad (Village Survey, 1995). Many of those who went abroad mortgaged their farmland for loans. Some were fortunate to make a fortune out of it; some could just pay off their loans and make their ends meet; however, others did not and lost their land.

Similar to many Isan villagers, people of both communities do not live in isolation. They are profoundly involved with national and international markets through the sphere of production (in terms of both farm production and the sale of their labor as a commodity), consumption, and distribution. They have undergone rapid change from being subsistence farmers to becoming commercial farmers through the expansion of the market economy, the development of rural-urban communication and infrastructure, and changes in ecological conditions. People no longer produce only for their families, but also for local, national, and global markets. They also rely on markets for necessary farm inputs and consumption items. Fluctuating farm prices in the world market have resulted in the poverty of small rural agricultural producers in Isan and elsewhere in Thailand. Most villagers in both communities complain a lot about their insufficient money for home expenses, farm investment, and debts. Many poor and middle family farms have debts charged by neighbors, merchants in the Khon Kaen city or

4 ) Mary Elizabeth Mills [1993] has provided a useful insight narrative in her dissertation entitled "We Are Not Like Our Mothers: Migrants, Modernity, and Identity in Northeast Thailand" with respect to conflicting identities and ideologies of an ideal traditional vs. modern women among young village women who have migrated to work in urban areas.

districts with exorbitant rates of interests varying from 5% to 15% per month.

Although these two communities share some similarities, they are perceived by the local authorities as being different with respect to development. Since Ban Phra won the village development competition at the regional level in the 1980s, it is perceived by the local government officials as a case of “successful” development. By contrast, Ban Koke is seen as “problematic” or “unsuccessful,” because some villagers of Ban Koke who have farm land in the Kok Hin Khao area engaged in on-going protests against the government over the conflict of land ownership rights since 1993.

### **Contesting Political-Cultural Space: A Note on Theoretical Considerations**

#### *The Hegemonic View of Development Is Never Complete*

Local discourses of development in Thailand have been immensely shaped by the hegemonic view of development of the Thai state. Nonetheless, the hegemonic ideology is not fixed, but constantly contested by different interest groups/classes in Thai society. As Gramsci [1971] suggests that when aspirations of the subordinate classes are not incorporated within the hegemonic ideology, then contestation of the hegemonic power by different subordinate classes will occur.

Following Gramsci, Raymond Williams [1977] has provided a useful theoretical insight on how the hegemonic view of development is challenged. He suggests we view hegemony not as a fixed, passive form of domination. Rather, hegemony is always a dynamic process that is receptive to challenge, correction, subversion, negotiation, and incorporation. He further argues that a lived hegemony “has to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own” [*ibid.*: 113]. He also discusses the ideas of counter-hegemony and alternative hegemony. While the hegemony extent of dominant meanings is always immense, it is never complete. At any time, the persistence of residual forms of the traditional culture and the emergence of newly produced cultural meanings, ideas, and values provide forms of alternative or directly oppositional politics and culture.

Development discourses in Thailand are varied and prolific. I view development discourses and practices as political-cultural space for contested meanings among different parties concerned. One development theory may propose to increase production growth through technological change and intensive use of available natural resources, while another's goal is to bring more distribution of income and resources to different groups of the population in Thai society [Parnwell 1996; Suntaree Komin 1989]. Some view development as an extension of state power to incorporate the peripheral rural village areas into the national economic polity regardless of state's rhetoric on the promotion of people's participation in rural development [Turton 1984; Hirsch 1990]. In some cases, development is seen as a means to advocate human rights and empower disadvantaged groups in society [Bantorn On-dam 1995]. Others see failure of contemporary development in Thai society as a result of

following Western development models. Thus, call for the return to village wisdom, community culture, and popular Buddhism, as a more appropriate frame of reference for a development model in the process of the Thai nation-state building [Sulak Sivaraksa 1987; Bamrung Bunpanya 1984].

I see cultural constructions of development meanings as an ongoing process where constant contestation and negotiation among different groups and individuals are taking place. The term development means different things to different people and societies, and has been studied from a variety of perspectives as already mentioned. Since 1960s the Thai state has supported development ideology that favors industrializing and modernizing the country through the capitalist expansion of the economy and technological innovations. Village discourses about development cannot be perceived as reflecting an unquestioned hegemony of the ruling power. On the contrary, development has become a political-cultural location with respect to contested meanings that entail both cooperation of villagers with state agencies and contestation of the authority of some of these agencies.

#### *On the Issues of Representations*

How to represent reality in each society is crucial in contemporary anthropological research, as people in each society are not uniform [Marcus and Fisher 1986]. They are different by class, gender, age, religious beliefs, ethnicity, among others. Taking all these variations and deviations into consideration, I realize that representations of reality are elusive, relational, interactive, dynamic, contested, and experiential [cf. Wagner 1981].

Foucault's insights on the dynamics of discourse and power provide an important theoretical basis for my study. He has made us ware of how certain representations can become dominant and shape the ways in which "truth" is imagined and acted upon while excluding and disqualifying others. Foucault suggests that:

Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements; the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. [Foucault in Rabinow 1984: 73]

According to Foucault, production and reproduction of "truth" in each society is characterized by five important traits. The political economy of truth is centered on the form of scientific discourse and institutions which produces it. There is a constant economic and political impetus to produce this truth in response to the demands of political power and economic structure. Truth is permeated throughout a society and consumed by circulation through mechanisms of education and information. Truth is produced and disseminated under dominant control of a few prominent political and economic apparatuses such as the university, army, press publishing houses, and the media. And finally, truth is a topic of political debate,



social information, and ideological struggles [*loc.cit.*].

Behar and Gordon [1995] conclude that representations must, thus, be the product of the multivocality of multiple subjects, which do not necessarily conform with each other. This view is in accordance with postmodern perspectives in anthropology that have focused on the notion of dialogue and the incorporation of multiple voices into an anthropological text [Lutkehaus 1995]. The usefulness of this approach is its ability to bring conflicting and diverging perspectives to the fore and; thus, to present a more complex representation of the heterogeneous nature of human cultural diversity and reality [Marcus and Fisher 1986].

## Local Cultural Constructions of Development in Isan

### *Sources of Cultural Change for Local Constructions of Development*

My fieldwork in Ban Phra and Ban Koke has confirmed that most villagers have made use of the existing old and new texts or cultural symbols to construct their local discourses of development [cf. Ricoeur 1971]. Keyes [1983] views these texts as cultural constructions, expressed in both oral and written narratives, ritual, and different forms of popular arts. Ricoeur [1971] contends that these texts are structured to make coherent statements about aspects of the world where people live and become fixed through their memories, written texts or other forms of writing (e.g. ritual and folk arts) so that these texts transcend time and place where they were created.

According to Keyes [1983; 1991b], these old cultural symbols are rooted in a Buddhist worldview that provides the source of village culture. These old texts are found in their village social life and organizations, oral history, old sayings, folk tales, folk music, and folk Buddhist rituals organized at the village temples, sermons of Buddhist monks, and local traditional rituals associated with animistic and Hindu-Brahmanistic beliefs and curing rites. In light of the rapid socio-economic change, I observed that villagers in Isan have also made use of new texts to construct their local development meanings. These new cultural symbols derive from their interaction with a wider society, such as government departments and officials, the market economy, the national education system, the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), NGOs, and the state-controlled and private media.

### *Old Sources*

#### *Shared Religious Beliefs and Rituals*

The majority of villages in Ban Phra, Ban Koke and elsewhere in the Northeast of Thailand share common religious beliefs, which are characterized as the syncretism of Theravada Buddhism and animism [Kirsch 1975]. Buddhist beliefs and rituals have traditionally played an important role in linking villagers to one another. Buddhist beliefs emphasize wisdom through observing Buddhist precepts and meditating, compassion, sharing, and non-attachment to worldly things. Popular Theravada Buddhist beliefs and rituals have provided

a source of cultural reference for constructing local views of development. Through Buddhist teachings and rituals, villagers are familiar with the idea of spiritual growth and development, such as sharing, compassion, cooperation for family and public affairs, and non-attachment to worldly things. All these are important elements to form the basis of local development views and practices. Shared beliefs make people aware of their shared identities, which somehow bind them together for community affairs.

Through their shared religious beliefs, a variety of activities for public affairs has been organized. For example, it is a tradition in Ban Phra and many northeastern Thai-Lao villages that female elders from every four to five households organize themselves into a unit to take care of the welfare of the community's Buddhist monks. Each unit alternately prepares breakfast and lunch for Buddhist monks in their village temples. Whenever there is a Buddhist holiday, each unit is responsible for organizing activities in consultation with the abbot and temple committee. Village women are nurturers of the Buddhism [Keyes 1984]. Normally, respectable village male elders are elected to be monastery committee members responsible for monastic affairs.

In addition, many youngsters in Ban Phra and Ban Koke and elsewhere in northeastern villages occasionally get together to do public work for their monasteries. From time to time, youngsters who have migrated to work in Bangkok like to organize the Kathin Buddhist ceremony to raise funds for temple affairs, such as temple renovation expenses. Through engaging in Buddhist affairs and helping one another, elders and youngsters feel that they are improving their stores of merit for betterment in their present and future lives.

Today, many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and some government departments have utilized some elements of popular religious beliefs to mobilize people for community development [Bunthien Thongprasarn 1998]. This is evidenced by the forest conservation activity through the application of the tree ordination. Ordained trees contain symbolic sacredness extending from the sanctity of the Lord Buddha. As a result, the idea of sacredness prohibits villagers from cutting down those ordained trees and thereby conserves the forests. In the Northeast, the belief in ancestral spirits (*phii puu taa*) still persists in many villages and helps to connect community people with each other for community forestry conservation and management.

#### *Village Institution and Community Culture*

Village institution provides a source of local model of development for villagers in both Ban Phra, Ban Koke and elsewhere in Thailand. A sense of belonging to the same community and shared community culture helps connect community people together for public affairs. Generally, local notions of development are related to ideas of social welfare, security, and wellbeing of villagers through collective action to achieve their shared goals. All these, reflected in material development and spiritual growth, are conspicuous attributes in their cultural constructions of local notions and practices of development. Villagers organize themselves around economic, political and cultural issues for the survival of the whole com-

munity. Some elders narrated that village social life requires that people be together to guarantee their welfare and survival.

Based on their oral histories, in old times, their forefathers got together to help clear dense forests and convert them into arable land. An old man in a local community in the Northeast said, "United we stand, divided we fall." They went hunting and gathering wild forest products together for the survival of all. The village administrations in local communities in consultation with their senior elders helped governing the whole villages and made sure that their community fellows were safe from being harmed by natural disasters and unlawful criminals. Those who had a record of being criminals were not accepted to stay in their communities. Community spirit and cooperation were the focus of their community culture, as these were necessary conditions for the survival of the community as a whole. Mutual reciprocity, trusts, cooperation and network ties existent in village social life or organizations form the basis of their local notions of development.

To guarantee their primary welfare, villagers have organized themselves into various traditional groups based on family, kinship and network ties among their neighbors within and across their communities, and the reciprocity of labor exchange among households in the same political-economic faction. While men have organized themselves in the sphere of public issues related to economics and politics, village women have grouped themselves around the domestic sphere. In addition to the village institution and community spirit, family and kin, neighborliness and patron-client relations have contributed to forming a basis for building trust, norms of reciprocity, mutual cooperation, and strong networks. All these are traditional sources of cultural change for constructing local notions and practices of development.

#### *Family and Kinship Relations*

Customarily, villagers in Thai-Lao communities practice a custom of uxorilocal residence after they marry.<sup>5)</sup> Land is usually inherited through the female line. However, with the scarcity of land at present, there is a tendency for many new couples to inherit land from both patrilineal and matrilineal lines. Normally, the youngest daughter marries and lives with the parents and will inherit the parental house land. In northeastern communities, kinship relations have laid a very important basis for trust, cooperation, and networks among villagers who belong to the same circle of family and kin relations. Extended family and bilateral kin groups are obviously significant cultural attributes, as they provide a primary safety net for villagers.

Tambiah [1970] asserts that the basic relationship between kinsmen of villagers in northeastern Thai-Lao communities is organized around economic, political, and ritual matters. Typically, all children live with their parents until they establish their own families. During the first few years of their marriage, a couple lives with their parents, helps work on

5 ) A husband moves to live with the parental family of his wife after marriage.

the farm and shares the same economic resources with the parental household. When the next female sibling marries, the first couple moves to build a new house within the same compound of their parental home, if land is available. Nonetheless, they still work on their parental land and share the same economic resources with their parents and other siblings who still live with the parents. When a man and a woman marry each other, their wedding combines the descent groups of the two families together. All of them will turn to be kinsmen of one another. When problems in life occur, an individual will turn to his or her family and household, then go to the circle of close kinsmen, then distant kinsmen, friends, and neighbors. As a result, family and kin relationships can be considered a primary institution of a village system. This institution functions to guarantee the survival of its members through the provision of necessary material welfare and psychological encouragement. Family and kinship relations are basis for group organizing and cooperation for social affairs of villages in rural Thai society.

Following modernizing projects of the country, many rural family farms, especially poor family farms, find it difficult to survive economically from the rural agricultural sector alone due to low farm produce prices and expensive farm inputs. Also, they have expenses relating to child education, medical care, clothes, food and household items, and social activities. Thus, they need to look for other sources of income to ensure the survival of their families. Many young couples tend to leave their children in the care of their aged parents in the villages and migrate to work in major cities or abroad (namely, the Middle East, Singapore, Taiwan, and Japan). Usually, they remit money home to support their parents and other siblings who stay behind and help their parents work on the farm. Norms of reciprocity are predominant in the structures of village relations and strengthen trust, cooperation, and network ties of villagers. Family and kin support are also expressed in the ideas of *bun khun* and *katanyuu* (norms of reciprocity) in Thai society, which I have argued elsewhere [Ratana Boonmathya 1997; Ratana Tosakul-Boonmathya *et al.* 1999].

### *Neighborliness*

In addition to family and bilateral kindred groups, neighbors within the same and across communities have played a significant social role in linking villagers to access resources that better benefit them individually and collectively. In several northeastern villages, a family that has no relatives usually seeks assistance from its neighbors in times of crises.

Neighbors who are not in conflict with each other tend to provide support upon requests of their community fellows. They interact with one another through gossiping, borrowing small items, visiting, discussing community problems, assisting each other with small tasks, sharing some meals and farm tools, and giving morale support to one another. From time to time, a village family gets access to job information and employment from its neighbors. Mutual reciprocity, common interests, hospitality, and sincerity are important for maintaining enduring friendships among neighbors. An old lady from a northeastern Thai-Lao village whom I interviewed states that a good neighbor is equivalent to one's own good relative.

Trust, cooperation and network ties among family and kinship groups and neighbors are generally very strong and ensure villagers' survival. In some situations, neighbors who belong to the same ethnic group gain some privileges whereas others do not.

*Patron-Client Relationships and Factional Groups*

Thai society is highly hierarchical. Each one has its own distinctive social status and is recognized by the public, accordingly. Senior and junior relationships are reciprocal. A senior is expected to gain more life experience and thus be more matured than a junior. Thus, seniors should be a role model for and have mercy to juniors. Also, seniors provide guidance and support to juniors whereas the latter gives loyalty, respect, and deference to the formers. In northeastern Thai-Lao villages and elsewhere in Thailand, when a family crisis happens, many villagers would go to seek assistance, not only from their families and kin groups, but from their patrons as well. Many times, a patron appears to be one of his client's kinsmen. Each political faction is primarily based on family and kinship relations, common political and economic interests, and relationships with their patrons or leaders of a political faction. Villagers are generally divided into various political factions based on their shared common interests and patron-client relationships with their leaders, which are linked up vertically to political powers outside their communities locally and nationally. It is not surprising to hear that nowadays vote-buying during political elections at all levels are rampant all over the country.

In summary, the majority of villagers in both Ban Phra and Ban Koke regardless of economic status, gender and age generally believe that development contains both spiritual and material elements. A popular Buddhist worldview has provided them with a source of reference for their spiritual growth and their community culture for community development. Religious beliefs and their Thai-Lao tradition have inculcated villagers on morality and about how to behave properly according to one's gender, family and social roles to fully develop one's spiritual growth. Moreover, religious beliefs and tradition that are expressed in their rituals, customs, and social norms, have reflected the close kinship cooperation in an agrarian-based society. Nature (good rain) and supernatural power (ancestral spirits) provide fertility and prosperity to village society via rice production. The rituals bond the community and the beliefs in their ancestral spirits reflect and reinforce kinship relations and community cooperation, which provide a basis for the formation of village development ideologies and strategies.

Village social life reflecting in the structures of village social relations and ideology has provided a frame of cultural reference for local constructions of development views and practices, emphasizing community spirit and mutual cooperation. Without trust, norms of reciprocity, mutual cooperation, strong networks and committed capable leadership, it would have been difficult for villagers to make sense of their local notions of development and practices.

Disparity and exclusion among different factional groups that share conflicting interests

do exist within a rural Thai-Lao community [Ratana Boonmathya 1997]. Nonetheless, due to hardships in life and having less technology to ease their way of living in the past, the sense of community spirit and cooperation for collective action were much stronger than they are now.

Many young villagers today feel that they do not have authority to speak of village culture because of their young ages and insufficient knowledge. Their sources of cultural interpretation are somewhat different from their parents, as they have been exposed more to the modern urban lifestyle through their long period of out-migration, and the decline in the belief of multiple rebirths. However, these young people do not completely disassociate from their traditional village culture, for many of them still maintain contacts with their families and kin through money remittance and regular visits to their home of origin. I observed that when these young migrants were in the communities, they still participated in the Buddhist rituals and made merits at the temples. Occasionally, some young village men, especially in Ban Phra, were ordained as Buddhist monks and stayed in the order for a period of time.

#### *New Sources*

In addition, to understand local discourses of development, I need to analyze the dominant discourses shaping the local. For the most part, local concepts of development have been largely influenced by state-led development ideology, which is in line with global capitalism. These new cultural symbols began to be introduced to northeastern villagers with the process of the Thai nation-state building in the early part of the twentieth century. Foundations for reorienting Thai society toward modernity and development had been laid primarily through the creation of the national education system, and the reformation of religious institution and political administrative bureaucratic system. State institutions and officials have played influential roles in producing and propagating official notions of development and modernity to local people.

By 1958 and a little after, the first public schools were established in Ban Phra and Ban Koke. Prior to the establishing of the public school, there was a close relationship between Buddhist institutions and individuals regarding education. Buddhist monks were responsible for teaching and inculcating children. In the early part of the twentieth century, the government had successfully coopted the Sangha to assist in the creation of the national education system [Keyes 1991a]. Initially, state-primary schools throughout the Northeast and elsewhere in Thailand, were housed in village temple buildings. Keyes [*ibid.*] argues that from the 1920s on, monk teachers were replaced by lay-teachers who were government officials. There was no resistance to the replacement of religious schools with secular ones from the Sangha or Siamese people. Many monks were actively involved with new schools. They were assigned to teach Buddhist ethics and morality as part of the new curriculum. Presently, most villagers over 15 years old have completed their primary education, at least in the fourth grade, through state schools. Attendance was compulsory currently until the

ninth grade. Villagers were inculcated into the Thai-nation state through common curriculum and were instructed to accept the bureaucratic authority and prepared for the capitalist market economy [*ibid.*]. Nowadays, education is valued as a source for cultural capital [Bourdieu in Harker *et al.* 1990] for villagers. Those who acquire higher education have better economic and employment opportunities and, thus, better access to the consumer culture of modernity and development and greater social acceptance from others. For most villagers in Ban Phra and Ban Koke, if they can afford higher education for their children (especially sons), they will do so because education symbolizes economic and social-status advancement.

Moreover, the mass media that infiltrated rural northeastern community life has played a key role in disseminating news and views of development and modernity. Radio stations in Thailand are either owned and/or operated by the national government or the Thai army. Some stations are rented to private agencies for broadcasting. Every day, most villagers of Ban Phra and Ban Koke, and elsewhere in Thailand, have an opportunity to listen to the national news and watch televised broadcasts by the government and private companies making the world seem smaller and more connected. Nowadays, villagers in different parts of the country are able to share a similar information within the same period of time [cf. Anderson 1991]. The first black and white televisions arrived in Ban Phra and Ban Koke by the late 1970s, and since then, televised broadcasts have played an increasing role in producing, reproducing and transmitting messages and images related to development and modernity. Today, 94.5% of the total families in Ban Phra, and 98% in Ban Koke have a television set at home (Village Survey, 1995).

In addition, village participation in the market economy, and their experiences in urban migration have shaped their discourses of development. Migration to work in the cities (mainly in Bangkok) and abroad became a widespread pattern to alleviate poverty at home and experience a wider world. Life in an urban environment provides a new frame of reference for village migrants, particularly young unmarried women and men, to comprehend the meanings of development and modernity which are not necessarily along the same line as their elders [Mills 1991]. Thus, tensions and conflicts among different age groups and genders arise as a result of modernization.

Another source of cultural change for villagers in some areas of Isan, especially from the 1950s to late 1970s, was the ideological critiques of the Thai state by cadres of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), although they had little ideological success in the region [Keyes 1983]. Since the 1980s, the coming of NGOs to work at the grass-roots level and the increased interaction with other social groups, such as academic circles and other people's organizations in and outside the region have offered villagers in some areas of the Northeast a variety of different development meanings. These development alternatives include, for example, self-reliance and self-sufficiency of local communities, spiritual development and community culture approach, environmental preservation, gender and development, community organizations, strong civil society, and basic human rights advocacy.



*General Local Notions of Development: Material versus Spiritual Development*

Most villagers of Ban Phra and Ban Koke heard the term development or *kaan phatthanaa* for the first time during the Sarit administration in the 1960s. Generally, most informants in both communities regardless of economic status, gender, and age see a desirable society as by the combination of the *samai kaw* (tradition) and *samai mai* (modernity); that is, a moral society with a good combination of material progress, spiritual growth, and local community culture.

Through government strategies and innovative changes, the increase flow of capital goods and commodity production, and the modern urban lifestyle, most informants began to make a distinction between *khong kaw* (old things) versus *khong mai* (new things), which are equivalent to *pra phae nii* (tradition) as opposed to *than samai* (modernity), respectively. *Kaan phatthanaa* is perceived by most informants in Ban Phra and Ban Koke as a process of change (or *kaan plian plang*) from traditional to modern, old to new, and rural to urban. Development is also understood as the improvement of rural infrastructure. In fact, this is its primary connotation among villagers regardless of gender, class, and age. To them, development is in accordance with the slogan proposed by the Sarit government in the 1960s: to have running water, electrical lights, good roads, and job employment.

General local notions of development found in the two communities can be well represented by Mr. Ha, an old man, 88, from a middle farm family in Ban Phra, as follows:

*Kaan phatthanaa* or *khwaam caroen* (progress) means to develop mind and body of a person, a family, a village community, and a nation, as a whole. It is a process of change from young to old. From backwardness to progress. It is to improve our poor living material conditions. Progress is to have running water, electrical lights, and good roads for convenient communications and transportation. Who knows, it might be possible that in the future villagers in the same district would be able to fly plane to see each other? Progress also means to have good maintenance of public roads, to dig more public ponds for village use, and to solve the livelihood problems of poor villagers. It also means to have good education for our children, good health, and enough water for farming. In addition, *kaan phatthanaa* is to retain our tradition and our community life, which means to preserve the spirit of sharing and helping one another, such as having kin and neighbors living in the same community and helping each other. Also, it means to lead our lives according to Buddhist preaching. This is progress in our community life. (Interview on April 18, 1995)

Many older villagers in both communities have reflected that cooperation or cooperative effort is crucial if development is to serve the interests of villagers. In the past, village cooperation was an essential component to guarantee survival. Encountering modern times, some villagers argued that the communal spirit of cooperation decreased, because many people had to migrate to work outside their communities. The commercialization of agriculture and the spirit of capitalism have undermined community cooperation. For instance, the penetration of capitalism into rural society replaced the traditional labor exchange with



wage labor employment and replaced the bartering system with the market economy. Money becomes the most important means for exchange of goods and products in contemporary village society. Presently, most villagers have less time to engage in community work, as they are busy striving to earn cash income for their families and to pay off debts. There is a tension between development for public goods and individual interests. In Ban Phra, kin, neighbors, and friends still support each other in organizing family and community rituals, such as births, ordinations of sons, weddings, and funeral ceremonies whereas the industrial estate project introduced by the government in Ban Koke has created disparity among kinship groups and neighbors.

In summary, many villagers in both communities and elsewhere in Isan occasionally use the term development and progress interchangeably. Their local understandings of development and progress are partly drawn from local community culture, which has largely been influenced by popular Theravada Buddhism, local traditions, and structures of village social relations. Their local views of development are also shaped by state development ideologies, their experiences with the market economy and out migration to urban areas, village school education, and the media. In other words, the local interpretations of development show villagers' creativity to appropriate the meanings from both old and new sources of cultural change, synthesize and re-create them.

### *Negotiating Meanings of Development*

The reactions of villagers in Northeastern Thailand to government intrusion into their lives and to increased integration into the world economy have been complex. From my fieldwork, I observed that some villagers responded by taking advantage of the expanding market. Others, however, were clearly disadvantaged by such participation, and some openly resisted certain development policies. By criticizing state-led development policies and practices, some villagers made attempts to counter the hegemonic view of development.

Most villagers of Ban Phra and Ban Koke, and elsewhere in Isan do not reject the commercialization of agriculture or the industrialization of the country. This is evident in their active participation in the expanding capitalist market economy. They have embraced the market economy by engaging in both on-farm and off-farm occupations.

Since the late 1960s, most villagers of Ban Phra and Ban Koke have actively engaged in cash crops production as promoted by the government. Villagers in Ban Phra are famous for producing vegetables for the Khon Kaen market. However, in Ban Phra there is a decline of young villagers' participation in farming production as farm prices are low and demand for labor by housing development projects and service-related industries in Khon Kaen (prior to the mid-1997) is increasing.

When asking about their opinions regarding industrial and agricultural development, many informants contend that while promoting the growth of the commercial and industrial sector, the government should not neglect the rural agriculture, as the village head of Ban Phra states:

I don't want farming to disappear, as most of us are not *kharatchakaan* (civil servants). Farming and industry should go together. Without farming, most villagers would have no guarantee when we are sick. It would be difficult for us. If we have rice fields, we still have some economic security in our lives. It does not matter even when the farm production is low. The majority of farmers cannot be *kharatchakaan*, as we are not qualified for that. Most of us finished only the fourth grade. Those farmers who have already sold out all of their farmland will have happiness temporarily, for they will suffer a lot in the long-run. Development should not forsake our tradition. We should combine the good aspects of our old tradition with the good aspects of modern technology. Thus, I am of the opinion that industry and agriculture should be developed side by side. (Mr. Seth, Interview on November 15, 1994)

Mrs. Napa, 43, a poor farmer in Ban Koke, states:

We can't stop farming. If farmers stop producing rice, it would be a devastating situation for all of us. The wage from industrial factory is not enough for us to survive. It is too low. We will have no security at all if we lose the back-up from agriculture. When I went to work in Bangkok, I had to pay for a room rent, water bill, my child's education, social expenses, and some foodstuff that my family could not produce by ourselves. Without producing our own rice, it would be extremely difficult for us to survive in Bangkok. Because we bring our food from home to eat while migrating to work in industrial factories, we can accept low wages. (Interview on November 12, 1994)

Napa's comment is important, as it provides a pointed criticism to industrialization in Thailand, and perhaps elsewhere in other developing countries. It demonstrates her sophisticated understanding of how the rural agricultural sector is subsidizing the cost of urban industry through the supply of food production and low wage labor. Using Marxist concept, Deere and de Janvry [1979] suggest that usually exploitation of labor power in the industrial production process generates profit to the owners of the means of production. Farmers-cum-wage laborers (or semi proletarian peasant labor) can be further indirectly exploited by wages that fall below subsistence needs, because parts of these needs are provided by the family in the home production process. Cheap peasant labor is, thus, a major source of the peasant exploitation under capitalism in the Third World. Although most informants in both communities advocate the co-existence of agriculture and industry concurrently, some wealthy and poor villagers support the official view of industrial promotion.

#### *Class, Gender, and Age Tensions in Local Discourses of Development*

My fieldwork in Ban Phra and Ban Koke convinced me that villagers are not unitary in their perspectives of development, but display multiple subjectivities differentiated by economic status, gender, and age. Individuals have multiple identities, which may come to the fore depending on their cultural, economic, and political circumstances and interests. In relation to development and modernity, these identities are not fixed, but constantly contested and

negotiated. Contradictions of class, gender, and age differences are immanent in the nature of local discourses of development.

Many informants from poor landless families and poor small farmers in Ban Phra think that they are left out of the development projects that are introduced into their community by the government. For instance, poor landless families cannot participate in the integrated farming and fish raising projects, since they have no farmland. Many small farmers in both Ban Phra and Ban Koke cannot afford the costs of the green revolution package. They have less access to credit loans from the government banks when compared to wealthier farmers, as they have no proper land titles and/or no collateral. Also, the government credits are usually meant for specific state-development programs, for which they are not qualified. In addition, they perceive that they are excluded from the fertilizer quotas subsidized by the government. The procurement of a fertilizer quota must be done through a Farmer Group or Farmer Co-operative organized by the local agricultural extension officers. The groups in both communities have no other functions than organizing farmers together when the time to order subsidized fertilizer quota comes. Usually, wealthier farmers are predominant in the group, for they have more potential to pay for subsidized fertilizers. Since the quota of these fertilizers is too limited to meet the demand of all farmers, this policy benefits the influential wealthy farmers more than the poor ones. Many poor landless peasants and poor small farmers agree that wealthier farmers have more access to the state agricultural extension work, such as subsidized fertilizer, and credit.

With respect to gender relations, the number of male and female migrants to work in urban areas is fairly equal. Many working village women in both communities have recognized the increasing roles of women in economic and community development. Similar to women in many places, village women of Ban Phra and Ban Koke have played a dominant role as nurturers in the reproduction and maintenance of their households. In addition, they have played a key role in economic activities. For example, women are managers of all convenient stores in both communities. Although many old village women have realized the increasing economic role of village women inside and outside their home production, they still rely on old cultural sources as a frame of reference when analyzing gender relations. They believe that women are the hind legs of elephants and men as front legs. Thus, men should take the leadership role of their families. According to them, there is no equality between women to men, for this is an aspect of their Isan-Lao traditions, and there is nothing wrong with this practice. It is just a sexual division of labor in village society.

Nonetheless, I happened to meet some young educated villagers who began to question the traditional patriarchal ideology. They feel that when compared to men, women have less access to education, receive lower wages, and lack access to many occupations and training. Women hardly exist in the village administration. They contend that all humans should be equal and, thus, women and men should have equal rights and opportunities pertinent to education, employment, wages, and administrative affairs.

In addition, I found that the surveillance of female sexuality pertinent to the spatial

movement of their bodies by family and society has a tendency to bar village women from leadership and skills training and education, especially when those training and education activities are being organized outside their communities. Consequently, these practices and ideology have implicitly restrained women from having equal opportunity and access with men to make their occupational choices and advancement in their lives. The influence of development and modernity has introduced new perceptions and ideas of urban lifestyle to villagers, particularly among young rural migrants who have worked and lived in the city. They have held different values and practices that are somewhat different from the old generations. Unlike their parents, they are attracted by the comfortable and material-oriented culture of modern urban lifestyle, which has provided a new cultural source for their development interpretations. Conflicting values and practices between the young and the old generations as a result of modernization endure [cf. Mills 1993].

*Contested Development Meanings: Two Case Studies*

During my stay in Ban Phra, when asking most informants what development meant to them, the most frequent spontaneous reply was the village development competition. In Ban Koke, most informants referred to the Kok Hin Khao land rights conflict. These two cases reflect most vividly and concretely the villagers' notions of development, for most informants in both communities spoke of the two cases as highest points of their experiences in development.

*Questioning the State's Definition of Development: The Case of the Village Development Competition*

Since its establishment in 1962 during the Sarit administration, the Department of Community Development has come into close contact with villagers and has played a role in reinforcing the state development ideology to local people; emphasizing the improvement of the material conditions; establishing group work for market production; and promoting body docility, order, and hygiene. The village development competition is one of salient, concrete development strategies of the Community Development Department to train people the ideas of community development and to develop a rural community and its people.

Initially, most villagers of Ban Phra were enthusiastic about the village development competition. They believed that the competition would bring development, progress, name, and fame to their community, had they won the competition. A government development officer from Department of Community Development also convinced them that their community had great potential to win the competition, for villagers were enthusiastic. Also, villagers had high respect for two charismatic community leaders: the village head and the abbot of the village temple, who could mobilize villagers to participate in the competition.

After the community agreed to join the competition, the officer and her friends then spent a lot of time with villagers. They held several meetings to explain the ideas and meanings of development. Through interaction with government officials, villagers learned

about official concepts of development emphasizing the improvement of material conditions; cleanliness and hygiene of their bodies, housing and surroundings; body docility, order and discipline; and socio-economic group organizing. Villagers were prepared to accept the hegemonic views of development and the bureaucratic authority, and to participate in the market economy [cf. Keyes 1991a]. The preparation process for the competition is well represented by the narration of Mr. Lian, 52, a middle farmer in Ban Phra, as follows:

I came to know *kaan phatthanaa* from Khun Pranee who is a community development worker from the district office. She held village meetings several times. We had meetings almost every night during that time. It was the period for village development contest. It was fun, though. We talked a lot about village development, sang village development songs and danced. At that time, everyone was enthusiastic to do development work though we did not know exactly what it was all about.

Khun Pranee said village development should start first with the improvement of our manners and then our living environment. Most villagers were trained about good manners. For example, in the meeting, whenever she called any of us by name, we should stand up and answer with *maa khrap* for men and *maa kha* for women.<sup>6)</sup> A male should always end his sentence with *khrap* whereas a female with *kha*,<sup>7)</sup> for this was a polite way of speaking. We should not use *kuu/mung*<sup>8)</sup> and curse or yell to each other. Those were bad words or ill-manners. Khun Pranee also taught us to say *sawatdii* for greeting.

The younger ones should always greet the elders by bowing to the elders and honoring them with *wai*. To be polite and honor the elders were indicators of being a developed person. She trained us to speak Central Thai and behave properly in public. During the meeting break, we were taught to sing development songs, which were about group unity and cooperation for village development, and development for the progress of our community and the nation. We also danced together (*ram wong*). We had a lot of fun.

In addition to speaking and behaving ourselves, Khun Pranee told us that development was about building roads and fences, growing pretty flowers or edible vegetables along the fences, cleaning our own houses and their surroundings, maintaining hygiene for ourselves, and organizing village groups to do development activities.

For example, we had a group for entertaining visitors and arranging *ba sii suu khwan* spiritual

6 ) *Maa khrap* and *maa kha* mean "I am here, sir/madame." This polite answer implicates the subordinate social status of the speaker to the superior status and rank the person who asks if she/he is present by calling his/her name.

7 ) *Khrap* is the polite particle at the end of a sentence in Central Thai language for male, and *kha* for female.

8 ) *Kuu* is a pronoun for "I" and *mung* for "you." In the old times, during the Sukhothai period in the thirteenth century, aristocrats used these pronouns. Today, they are considered by the urban middle class and elite, especially in Bangkok, as rude and impolite. Only those rural uneducated "country bumpkin" and working class would use these pronouns. In the rural areas and among the working class population in Thai society, these pronouns are commonly used.

calling ritual for them. Actually, the villagers were divided into 16 groups according to village clusters. Each group would help each other clean and take care of their own environs and strengthen development group activities. Khun Pranee helped improve us a lot, though she was not one of us. She was originally from the South. After Ban Phra won the contest, Khun Pranee was promoted to do another job. We did not see her anymore. I don't know where she is now. Nonetheless, I am no longer interested in the village development competition because we already won the competition. Also, now I have no time for doing the village development activities. I need to work for my family. It was fun, though, when Khun Pranee was here. (Interview on April 16, 1994)

Many villagers told me that Khun Pranee and her colleagues also introduced the idea of a house fence for modernity and development. The ideal village, according to these officers, is one where residential houses are constructed with clear boundaries and demarcation from each other through fencing.<sup>9)</sup> They should be built along straight streets and alleys in the community. All village streets must be straightened and cleaned. In addition, the name of the head of the family and the address should be put up in front of the house for public notice.

During the contest, each family was advised to invest in buying bamboo to make a house fence for order and tidiness of the community. Along the fence, different slogans deriving mostly from the speeches of the government leaders, the Old Central Thai sayings, and Buddhist teachings, were written on small wooden plates to remind villagers to behave and think well. All these signs faded away after the contest, following the rain storms and bright hot sunshine in Khon Kaen. Today, no one in Ban Phra seems to care for repairing the wooden signs. In addition, villagers were encouraged to grow edible vegetables or pretty flowers along the fence, for this would make the general environs beautiful. All families were also required to clean their houses and the general surroundings regularly.

In my view, the use of space and the idea of house fencing in Ban Phra during the competition worked to emphasize the idea of "watching over" the subjects of the government authority and the creation of orderly, hygienic, and docile bodies. The order of things and discipline were seen through the arrangements of house, fence, streets, and slogans, which worked in collaboration with other state-ideological apparatuses such as the modern school system, to inculcate villagers with capitalist development and accepting the authority of the government bureaucracy [Keyes 1991a]. In other words, the concepts of order, hygiene, and house fencing worked together to support the ideology of capitalist expansion which requires docile bodies to produce for the market economy and be obedient and subjugated to the centralized bureaucratic authority [cf. Foucault in Rabinow 1984; Mitchell 1988].

In the end, Ban Phra won the village development competition at the provincial and regional levels, which brought name and fame to the community. Villagers hired two big

9 ) I find this practice contradictory to the idea of village cooperation, which the government development officers attempted to promote in Ban Phra.

buses to take them to Bangkok to receive the certificate and cash award of about 10,000 baht from the Prime Minister, General Prem Tinnasulanonda. They were happy and honored to have photos taken with the Prime Minister. Some informants said that there was some positive impact on their community as a result of the village development competition. For instance, every family had a toilet, and most families had a big jar for keeping drinking water. Many mothers were trained on how to prepare nutritious food for their children.

Nonetheless, when asking if villagers wanted to continue doing village development activities, none of them expressed enthusiasm to do so. They all stated that they had to work to earn money for their families, and they did not have time for such activities. Most of them agreed that the competition did not bring any substantial changes to their economic livelihood. Some poor farmers and landless peasants mentioned that their families could not afford the costs of the village development competition, and viewed that the competition was just an activity for those who with leisure time did not need to struggle to earn cash income for their families.

During the competition, the average family expense for purchasing materials, such as bamboo, flowers, vegetable seeds, wooden plates, and contributions to development group activities, along with the entertaining of visitors was about 2,000 baht (US\$80). The village head man by that time mentioned that he became indebted about 50,000 baht (US\$2,000) as a result of the village development competition.

The village development competition shows how villagers of Ban Phra initially adopted the government's definition of development success; however, by the end of the contest, most of them realized that such a definition was merely an illusion, for it did not bring them any substantial economic improvement.

### *The Case of Kok Hin Khao Land Rights Conflicts*

Development is to have industry for the prosperity of the country. I know, but I have nowhere else to go. I do not object to industry. But industry should not make people suffer and destroy their environment. Please tell the government not to take this land from farmers. We have tilled the land for years. We have developed the land and now the government wants to take it for industrial estate project. (Mother Nuan, 78, Interview on October 11, 1994)

Kok Hin Khao is an undulating upland area, located along the Friendship Highway 37–40 kilometers north of Khon Kaen in the district of Nam Phong. The total land area is 2,661 *rai* (1,064.4 acre)<sup>10)</sup> (Office of Industry, Khon Kaen 1995). To the southwest of Kok Hin Khao lies the Huai Sia Ten stream, which flows down to the Nam Phong River. There are 171 families comprised of about 850 people from four communities near Kok Hin Khao farming on this land [Chatmalee Ratanasiriprom 1994]. During my field work, there were four families

10) One acre is equivalent to 2.5 *rai*.



living on the Kok Hin Khao while the rest commuted daily to their farms. Mostly, villagers grow cassava and sugar cane on the upland area. In the lowlands, villagers plant water-melon, green beans, soy beans, and some marketable vegetables.

The story of Kok Hin Khao began on April 8, 1989 when the Chatichai government agreed to support the proposal of the Industrial Estate Authority of Thailand (IEAT) with respect to the establishment of industrial estates in Khon Kaen and other provinces in Isan to promote regional industrialization (Office of Industry, Khon Kaen 1995). In Khon Kaen, the IEAT had called for applications from private enterprises to seek joint venture with the government in this project, but none of them were able to acquire a large piece of land for the project.<sup>11)</sup>

During the Chuan administration in 1993, the project was resurrected. The meeting between the government and the business sectors was held in Khon Kaen on May 14–15, 1993. Upon the recommendation of Khon Kaen Industrial council, they came to the conclusion that about 1,064.4 acre of the Kok Hin Khao area had high potential to be developed into an industrial estate because the area is close to the Nam Phong River, Friendship Highway, and the railway station. It is also an upland area and there is no need for land fill, which would cost a lot (Khon Kaen Province, 1994).

The land ownership rights over the Kok Hin Khao area are currently problematic and controversial. While the Khon Kaen provincial administration claims that the land was public under the supervision of the Nam Phong subdistrict, the Ubon Ratana Self-Help resettlement scheme asserts that the land was under its supervision according to the Royal Decree of a Self-Help resettlement scheme issued on October 14, 1985, which has a retrospective effect from 1964 onward (Khon Kaen Province, 1995).<sup>12)</sup> Nonetheless, the district of Nam Phong admits that it has no official land title to certify the state-ownership rights and to demarcate the clear land boundary of Kok Hin Khao area.<sup>13)</sup>

Likewise, villagers, who have farmed on the Kok Hin Khao and did not want to sacrifice the land for the industrial estate project, affirm that their ancestors had settled in the area prior to the declaration of the Ubon Ratana Self-Help resettlement in 1985 and even before the Nam Phong subdistrict declared the area to be public land in 1949. A leader of the Kok Hin Khao villagers mentioned that at least two generations of villagers occupying land in

11 ) Addendum to document or. kor No. 0807.1/4958 dated September, 1995, issued by the IEAT.

12 ) Villagers who have lived in the resettlement areas can apply to be resettlement members, and must obtain the usufruct land rights starting from *nor khor 1 to 3*. *Nor khor 3* will be issued to resettlement members who have farmed 5 years consecutively. Once obtaining the *nor khor 3*, the resettlement members can apply for *nor sor 3 kor*, a type of official title deeds from the Land Department. Each family in the resettlement areas cannot own more than 50 *rai* (20 acre). In practice, some villagers report that the process of issuing legal land ownership documents to villagers from both the Ubon Ratana Self-Help Resettlement and Land Department is very time-consuming, confusing, and in some cases involves bribery. Some villagers have been waiting for over 20 years, but have not yet received any proper legal land rights documents.

13 ) Document Khor.kor. No. 0420/768 dated March 1, 1994, issued by the head district of Nam Phong to the supervisor of the Ubon Ratana Self-Help resettlement.



Kok Hin Khao were not informed by the local district authority that the land was public until 1993, when the government wants this land for the industrial estate project. The district authority has recognized the occupation of villagers on the Kok Hin Khao for years. Villagers pay land tax to the Land Department at the district office yearly. Many local government agencies, such as Agricultural Extension Department and Land Development Department came to support them to develop their agricultural production. Moreover, in 1954, the Nam Phong district office informed villagers who have land on Kok Hin Khao to apply for land titles.

In addition, older villagers mentioned that old coconut trees one finds there are good evidence to testify that there used to be a village settlement in this area, since the coconut trees are usually not a native wild plant. They have to be grown by humans. The age of these coconut trees can help estimate the time when people settled in the area.

With all this concrete evidence, most villagers were quite confident that they have rights to the Kok Hin Khao area. It was unfair to them when the local authority agreed to pay compensation for only agricultural harvests, but refused to pay for land compensation. This was strongly opposed by villagers who initially wanted 30,000 baht (US\$1,200) per *rai* (0.4 acre), if they were to move. However, after the long process of open protests to the local authority since 1993, the majority of the Kok Hin Khao villagers decided not to sell their land. In addition, some villagers in the Nam Phong district, especially those who lived close to the Kok Hin Khao area said that they did not want the industrial estate on Kok Hin Khao, for they were concerned about environmental problems, such as air and water pollution, which might be caused by the industrial estate.

Prior to my fieldwork, I had a pre-conception that local resistance to the dominant power and ideology is usually organized on the basis of class and/or ethnic conflicts. It is still possible to view the Kok Hin Khao protests to the government in conventional class conflict terms when taking into account that the state and capitalists are in different political-economic classes from villagers of Kok Hin Khao, who are predominantly farmers and can be considered as a "class in itself." Nonetheless, having immersed myself with the people's protests at Kok Hin Khao during my field work, I realized that villagers in Ban Koke were not united, but were divided across different economic classes depending on their interests. The Kok Hin Khao case suggests that local resistance to state-led development ideology is not necessarily organized around the issues of class or ethnic conflicts, but can be generated out of a shared economic interests of an alliance of factions of villagers from different economic strata.

In Ban Koke, I found at least three broad groups with different interests:

- 1) The Kok Hin Khao group (58% of the total families in Ban Koke) comprised of villagers who have farm land on Kok Hin Khao, some of their relatives, and those who do not have farm land on Kok Hin Khao, but have sympathy for and unity with the group or do not want industrial factories. This group received support from an envi-

ronmental NGO named the Pong River Conservation Recovery Project (PRCR), and Khon Kaen University research team led by Dr. Koson Srisang. However, after the end of the research work, the research team has gradually withdrawn from the area since 1995. The Kok Hin Khao group has organized open protests to the government since 1993. They are of the opinion that they do not object to industry, but industry should not make villagers suffer. The government should promote the co-existence of agriculture and industry concurrently. During my field work, there are two factions within this group: one is the majority of Kok Hin Khao villagers who have organized open protests to the government and do not want to sell their land, the other comprised of about 15–20 families who want to cooperate with the local authority hoping that they would get land compensation from the government;

- 2) the local power group who strongly supports the industrial estate project, comprised of most of the village officials, the *kamnan* (head of the sub-district who resides in Ban Koke, and some villagers (about 21% of the total families in Ban Koke). This group allied itself with a few local and national politicians, some local land speculators and government agencies at the district and provincial levels. This group asserts that the Kok Hin Khao villagers are legally trespassers to the state-owned land. They accuse the Kok Hin Khao group as being obstacle to progress and prosperity of Isan regional development. During my field work, the Kok Hin Khao group sanctioned this group by not participating in any community ritual or development activities organized by the village officials from this group; and
- 3) the final group, comprised of those who are non-partisan and do not want to get involved directly with the land conflict in Kok Hin Khao (21% of the total families). Mostly, they are village migrants who come to visit the community from time to time and, thus, do not catch up with what has been going on in the community in detail.

Most villagers in all these three broad groups are united across economic classes regardless of sharing similar Lao ethnic origin and traditions. Some of them who are in conflict do share the same kinship origin. Surprisingly, most villagers in the first and the second groups are not strangers to each other, but enemies familiarly known.

The majority of the Kok Hin Khao are not in opposition to the government even though both parties have conflicting interests. They only want the government to incorporate their economic interests into the national interests by canceling the project at Kok Hin Khao and issuing them the proper land titles. Some older villagers contend that a good leader should possess moral integrity. The government, as their leader, should bring welfare and have compassion to poor people. Some leaders of the Kok Hin Khao argue that the relationship between the state and villagers be one of mutual reciprocity, of patron and clients [cf. Scott 1972]. Most rural villagers have engaged in food production and wage labor for the local, national, and international markets. Also, they pay tax to the government. The government is like their patron or parents, whereas they are clients or children. Most Kok Hin Khao

villagers are expecting the government to play the role of kindhearted patron.

From the long process of protests against the industrial estate project at the Kok Hin Khao, most village leaders of the protest group agree that state agencies are not all united. For example, the Department of Public Welfare has taken side with villagers of Kok Hin Khao whereas the district and provincial offices are for the industrial project. Even though most academics who came to study about the Kok Hin Khao controversial issue are bureaucrats, some of them share different views from the dominant development ideology and have sympathy for the Kok Hin Khao villagers. Balancing conflicting power and different interests are another prominent strategy used by the Kok Hin Khao villagers in their protests.

From participant observation during their open protests, I found that leaders of the Kok Hin Khao have applied the de-constructing strategy to unmask the official rhetoric on development discourses, which is the most prominent strategy. In addition, they attempt to seek allies within and outside the bureaucratic system, such as officials from different government departments, NGOs, academics, and the media to support their struggles.

Generally, the hegemony of the ruling power bloc derives from the popular consent, which is possible through the incorporation of the needs and interests of several subordinate groups within the hegemonic ideology. Once the ruling power bloc denies these rights (of a subordinate group), resistance from a subordinate group may be generated. Under the right moment when the group could provide its own revolutionary and charismatic leadership and is capable of expanding its organizing framework with the support of its allies, the emergence of resistance may occur. The case of Kok Hin Khao supports this Gramscian argument.

#### *Summary of the Case Studies*

In summary, the case of the village development competition shows how local discourses of development have largely been influenced by state-led development strategies. The interaction between the state and villagers via the state-sponsored development programs, the local civil servants, the national school system, and the media proved to be major mechanisms to produce, reproduce, and propagate development meanings and messages from the state to its citizens. It is the state that defines the meanings of development, which reflect more on the nature of the top-down approaches by the state and less popular participation from the grass-root level. Most villagers in Ban Phra and elsewhere in Thailand, however, are not passive actors. They consciously compare the development definitions given to them by the government with what happens in reality.

The second case study shows clearly how the Kok Hin Khao villagers feel threatened by the regional industrialization policy of the Thai state. While sharing the state ideology of development through their participation in the expansion of the market economy and the improvement of the road system and other rural infrastructure in their neighborhood, the majority of the Kok Hin Khao group in Ban Koke have expressed discontent with state-led development strategies related to the industrial development project, as their farm land

might be taken away by the government without any compensation. The conflicting interests over land ownership rights in the Kok Hin Khao villagers and the government shows how development messages and meanings of the Thai state are being contested by villagers.

### **Concluding Remarks**

After four decades of development sponsored by the Thai state, the socio-economic differentiations among different groups of its citizens continue to deepen. Poverty among rural villagers, particularly in Isan remains. As the impact of development and modernity is so intricate and goes far beyond the village boundary, many villagers today find themselves in competition with the commercial sector and some government agencies for local natural resources. Conflicts over the use and control of local natural resources, such as land, water, forests, and mining between local communities, various government agencies, and urban industries are rising. In addition to the two case studies mentioned in this paper, numerous controversial development projects in Isan and elsewhere in Thailand continue to persist. These development projects have brought an intricate and profound impact on villagers' ways of living, such as the Pak Mun and the Rasri Salai dam construction and the Potash mining project controversies.

Local natural resources, which once were supervised by local communities as local common property, were gradually transferred to be under the tight control of the Thai state and urban capitalists in the names of development, progress, and law. I agree with Escobar [1995] that village cultural constructions of development have emerged to provide a critique of state development strategies and to propose development alternatives that would enable many villagers to gain a better share of the fruit of development.

The story of development in Thailand today is more complicated than before. There is no one true voice with respect to development from villagers and government representatives. Nowadays, Isan villagers are themselves divided in their perspectives of development depending on their economic, and the gender or generational interests they choose to represent, comply with, or contest. Development has become a political-cultural location where constant negotiation and contestation among different groups are taking place. These divisions also reflect disparity among non-rural population from the local to the national level, including politicians, government officials, scholars, and NGO personnel. The ideal of becoming a modern Thai nation that is in line with global capitalism, has become hegemonic and irreversible, but the strategies to achieve this ideal have been diversified and contested by different groups. The contestation over development is about the means by which different segments of society can achieve modernity.

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